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ABSTRACT

Findings from a survey that examined the vast scope of research training in counseling psychology programs and topical areas that are addressed in dissertation research are presented in this paper. The questionnaire included both open- and closed-ended questions and were completed by 166 recent graduates of doctoral programs in counseling psychology. Results indicate that correlational, survey, and experimental methods were frequently used. The use of qualitative methods in counseling psychology training seemed to be growing in popularity, although training in qualitative methods remains uneven, with 62% of respondents reporting that qualitative methods were covered in their training program. Findings also indicate that the profession of counseling psychology is shifting away from its roots in career counseling and developmental needs of individuals and is embracing other areas. This has given rise to an increasingly diverse range of topics of research, including specific populations, psychopathology, career issues, professional issues, instrument development, outcome studies, counseling process, and ethical issues. (RJM)

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Dissertation Research in Counseling Psychology: Topics, Methods, and Qualitative Training

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Abstract

A national survey of counseling psychology graduates examined the research methods and topics addressed in dissertation research. Results indicate that the most frequently used research method was correlational (45%), followed by survey methods (31%). Sixty-two percent of the respondents reported that qualitative methods were covered in their training program. Doctoral students are investigating a diverse range of topics including specific populations, psychopathology, career issues, professional issues, instrument development, outcome studies, counseling process, and ethical issues.

Dissertation Research in Counseling Psychology:

Topics, Methods, and Qualitative Training

The field of counseling psychology represents one of the most diverse disciplines addressing the study of human behavior. From its roots in vocational counseling and its emphasis on developmental issues, the field has expanded to include health counseling and multicultural counseling, among other areas of study. With the addition of new areas of counseling, new research questions must be asked and studies designed to answer them. The types of designs used to answer these studies must be commensurate with the sophistication of the area of investigation (Cesari, 1986). Consequently, there is a place for additional ways to answer research questions other than the traditional methods employed by the science of psychology.

While the areas that make up counseling psychology have expanded, it seems that there appears to be a blurring of lines between those research questions posed by counseling psychologists and clinical, experimental, and educational psychologists (e.g., Keeley, Shemberg, & Zaynor, 1988).

This article highlights findings from a survey that examined the scope of research training in counseling psychology programs and topical areas addressed in dissertation research conducted by recent doctoral candidates. The survey provided information regarding the status of current research training in quantitative and qualitative research methods in counseling psychology doctoral programs.

Method

Survey

A survey of dissertation research methods was developed for this study. The questionnaire included both open- and close- ended questions. Participants were requested to provide the title of their dissertation, research methods used, and information regarding methods included in their research training. Several questions focused on the recent graduate's experience with qualitative research and the degree to which these methodologies are incorporated and supported by their respective faculties and programs.

Participants

A list of recent graduates from doctoral programs in counseling psychology was obtained from Division 17 of the American Psychological Association. Questionnaires were sent to 428 graduates of counseling psychology programs from 1991 to 1992, along with a letter of introduction and a request for participation. Follow-up letters and questionnaires were sent to nonrespondents. A total of 77 (17%) were returned as undeliverable (e.g., wrong address, etc.) and a total of 181 useable surveys were returned, for a return rate of 52%. Of those, 166 or 92% reported their dissertation titles. Graduates from over 43 counseling psychology programs were represented in the respondent pool.

Procedure

A qualitative theme analysis of dissertation titles was done to determine topics researched by counseling psychology graduates. First, all members of the research

team independently identified categories represented by the titles. Team members then met and compared the categories. After discussion, only those categories that all members agreed upon were considered to be representative of the topical areas or research themes. Ten thematic categories emerged from the data. Twenty seven titles gave so little information that it was not possible to identify the topic of the dissertation. They were placed in a special category designated as "not classifiable." The remaining titles were then reexamined by the team and categorized according to these themes. Titles were placed in up to two of these categories. Finally, one member of the team served as an auditor and reexamined all the titles to ensure that they had been reasonably categorized.

Qualitative and Quantitative Results

Table 1 presents information regarding the research methods used in conducting dissertation research. The most frequently used method was correlational with a total of approximately 45% using this in their dissertation research. This was followed next by survey methods (31%). Experimental between-groups designs was next with approximately 30% of respondents indicating this as their primary descriptor of methodology for their dissertation research.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents indicated that qualitative research methods were included in their program. Forty-nine percent indicated that qualitative methods were taught as a part of other research methods courses, while 31% indicated that a separate course was offered on qualitative methods. Forty-one percent reported that the qualitative courses were offered by professors in their program. Thirteen percent

reported that they learned about qualitative methods in courses in other departments.

Approximately 9% of participants reported that students in their program were not permitted to use qualitative methods in their dissertations, but 44% indicated that they were encouraged to use qualitative methods in research. Twenty-two percent of the respondents indicated that there were no faculty who could serve as resources on qualitative research methods in their program. Thirty-three percent of the respondents reported that they did not know of any faculty in their respective programs who did qualitative research.

Asked how they learned qualitative research methods, 24% said by assisting faculty on qualitative research projects, 11% by assisting faculty in other departments on such projects, 18% by obtaining consultation from people outside of counseling psychology, while 15% indicated that they taught themselves the qualitative research process. Twenty-five percent of the respondents reported that they did not know anything about qualitative research methods.

Participants were also asked to indicate the status of their dissertations in terms of eventual publication. Twenty-three percent indicated that they had submitted an article based upon their dissertation to refereed journals. Sixteen percent indicated that they had received feedback on their manuscripts from journal editors. Forty-four percent reported that they planned to submit their dissertation research to a journal in the future.

An analysis was conducted to examine the topical areas covered by dissertation research in this pool of recent doctoral graduates. Dissertations could be identified

with up to two categories. Table 2 lists the frequencies by topical area and percentages based upon total number of categorizations. Sixty-six of the studies focused on specific populations such as women, men, adult children of alcoholics, college students, veterinarians, athletes, homosexuals, members of religious communities, nurses, Cuban-Americans, Brazilian immigrants, and others. It is of interest that only 10 of the studies dealt with college students. Topics varied in breadth; some were very broad, such as elderly men and women while others were very specific, such as dual career gay male couples and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints blended families.

The second largest group (f=28) focused on psychopathology including such topics as post traumatic stress disorder, somatoform disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, sexual aggression, eating disorder, childhood depression, and personality disorders.

Career issues continue to be a focal point of counseling psychology dissertations; 26 dealt with such aspects as job satisfaction, factors influencing career choice, and career self-efficacy.

Twenty-three dissertations dealt with professional issues, one-third of which focused on training or supervision topics. Other topics in this category were psychologists' anger toward clients, therapists' psychological profiles in reactions to personal experiences that affect their functioning, adjustment, and decisions to seek therapy, premature termination form therapy, factors that influence client satisfaction and preference for counselor, counselors' approaches to hypothesis testing about

clients, and methods used in psychological research.

Instrument development was the next most frequent category, accounting for 18 studies. In some instances, there was an adaptation of an already existing instrument to a population or problem other than the one for which the instrument had originally been developed.

Only 12 studies focused on the outcome or effectiveness of an intervention. Specific topics included alcoholism treatment, counselor-client relationship as a treatment factor, and the impact of social skills training on adult males. Family and couple relationship issues were the topics of 12 dissertations. Ten studies focused on physical health issues, including disease (e.g., cancer, Alzheimer, AIDS), weight loss and maintenance, and pain management.

The last two categories, counseling process and ethical issues, each accounted for 4 dissertations out of the total. The ethics category included studies that focused on ethical decision making, moral development, and ethical issues encountered in the supervisory relationship. Counselor process included those studies focusing on therapeutic interactions and interpersonal process.

Discussion

The current study of counseling psychology graduates found that correlational, survey,and experimental methods were frequently used. This result is commensurate with some findings in clinical psychology (Keeley, Shemberg, & Zaynor, 1988); clinical psychology dissertations primarily employed traditional research methods, with fewer than 10% utilizing nontraditional methods including survey and qualitative approaches.

The use of qualitative methods in counseling psychology training may be growing in popularity (e.g., Kopala & Suzuki, 1995). Of the doctoral students who responded that qualitative methods were taught, about one-half reported that they were routinely trained in these methodologies and a little less than one third were given the opportunity to take a separate course.

Despite the encouraging results of this study, training in qualitative methods remains uneven with some programs prohibiting the use of qualitative methods and others encouraging their use but without faculty mentors. Qualitative methodology is complex and requires extensive training. The usage of qualitative methods without adequate training could lead to lengthier completion time for dissertations, costly errors, and may result in the imposition of a quantitative framework on qualitative questions and research.

The profession continues to be concerned about the lack of research productivity of counseling psychologists (see Phillips & Russell, 1994). In fact, when examining the research training practices of APA Counseling Psychology, nonAPA Counseling Psychology, and Counselor Educational doctoral programs, Galassi, Stoltz, Brooks, and Trexler (1987) found that only 13.9% of students per each type of counseling program published research. The present study indicates that 23% had submitted their research promptly after having completed their doctoral dissertations, and an additional 44% planned to submit sometime in the future. While it is unknown how many manuscripts eventually were published, clearly new graduates are submitting work for review.

The present study also suggests that the profession of counseling psychology is shifting away from its roots in career counseling and developmental needs of individuals and is embracing other important areas. In response to changing issues in psychology and society, students are selecting diverse topics for study. Although some may perceive this as a loss of professional identity, in fact, selection of less traditional topics for study is a realistic and practical movement reflecting the dynamics of society; other methods of investigation must be used. Keeley, Shemberg, and Zaynor, 1988) discussed the inadequacy of psychological research and methods and cited Koch (1981) in explaining that "important sectors of psychological studies require modes of inquiry rather more like those of the humanities than the sciences" (p. 216).

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Table 1

Percentages of Research Methods Used

Method	Percentage Used
Correlational	46
Survey	31
Experimental Between Groups	30
Quasi-Experimental	24
Qualitative Interview	15
Other Research Methods	10
Qualitative Case Study	05
Historical	05
Experimental N=1	02
Qualitative Ethnographic	02
Qualitative Participant Observation	01

Note: Respondents could indicate more than one method to describe their dissertation methodology.

Table 2

Topics of Dissertations

Topic	f	%
Specific Populations	66	29
Psychopathology	28	12
Career Related	26	11
Professional Issues	23	10
Instrument Development	18	08
Outcome Studies/Treatment Effectiveness	12	05
Families/Couples	12	05
Physical Health	10	04
Counseling Issues	04	02
Ethics	04	02
Not Classifiable	27	12

Note: Dissertations could be placed in up to two categories, therefore, frequencies exceed the total number of respondents. Percentages are based upon number of classifications.

Authors' Notes

Mary Kopala, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, Educational Foundations and Counseling. Lisa Suzuki, Ph.D. was an assistant professor at Fordham University at the time the study was conducted and currently is an assistant professor at New York University, Department of Applied Psychology. Leo Goldman, Ph.D. was adjunct professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, Educational Foundations and Counseling, at the time the study was conducted and is currently an adjunct professor at New York University, Department of Applied Psychology. Lisa Galdi is a doctoral student at Fordham University, Department of Psychological and Educational Services.